

VZCZCXR06186
RR RUEHIK
DE RUEHTH #0078/01 0181442
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 181442Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1034
INFO RUEHIK/AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI 1758
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NICOSIA 2919
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000078

SIPDIS

STATE FOR ECA/PE/C/CU
EUR/SE GCOWAN, EUR/PPD SALTMAN-WINANS
THESSALONIKI FOR CONGEN

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [GR](#)

SUBJECT: Greek Minister of Education Discusses Reform with New Ambassador

Refs: A) 06 ATHENS1507 B) 06 ATHENS 1556 C) 07 ATHENS 2119

¶11. (SBU) Summary: On January 3, 2008, the Ambassador and CAO paid a courtesy call on Greek Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Evripides Stylianides. During a wide ranging discussion, Stylianides affirmed his desire to include American-affiliated educational institutions in any reforms that recognize degrees and/or professional qualifications but acknowledged the difficulties in amending the Greek Constitution to enable these reforms. He suggested that the Ambassador convince the opposition PASOK party leader George Papandreou to support the reforms. If reform efforts fail, he also suggested alternate strategies for American-affiliated institutions to remain competitive. During the very cordial conversation, Minister Stylianides also reiterated his interest in sending a delegation to the U.S. to learn more about the U.S. educational system, including charter schools through which the Ministry can advance Greek studies. End Summary

¶12. (SBU) On January 3, 2008, Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard and Cultural Affairs Officer Gloria Berbena paid a courtesy call on Greek Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Evripides Stylianides. This was Ambassador Speckhard's first opportunity to meet Minister Stylianides since presenting his credentials in November 2007. Minister Stylianides welcomed the call and engaged in a frank, cordial discussion about the challenges of running a Ministry with over 200,000 civil servants, amounting to approximately one third of the Greek public sector. He highlighted his efforts to improve management of the Ministry, to provide laptop computers to every student through an affiliation with Microsoft, to shift classroom emphasis to environmental, cultural, and multi-lingual subjects, and to improve the training and recruitment of qualified teachers. He particularly lamented the often poor quality of Greek teachers today, compared with previous generations.

¶13. (SBU) The conversation eventually focused on the proposed education reforms, particularly amendment of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution. Ambassador Speckhard voiced his concern about the current, constitutionally mandated discrimination against private, non-state schools (see reflets) and about the additional probability that local, private EU schools will gain an advantage over local, private American schools if the EU 2005/36 Directive is implemented in Greece without special consideration of the American institutions. He also noted his concern about accreditation standards that might be imposed that would be disadvantageous to U.S. institutions. He asked how the U.S. Embassy could help advance much needed educational reform to create a more level playing field for U.S. educational institutions.

¶14. (SBU) While acknowledging that a Constitutional amendment would

be the most clear cut solution, Minister Stylianides underscored the difficulties in amending the Constitution during this Parliamentary session. He suggested that Ambassador Speckhard talk directly to opposition PASOK party leader George Papandreou to convince him to revert to his former position of support (abandoned due to party and academic pressure). Minister Stylianides suggested a soft approach, noting that if Papandreou wants to be Prime Minister again, he needs to cater to the center which recognizes that education reform is essential if Greece is to remain competitive in shifting markets. Stylianides said he too is adopting a soft approach to the opposition to leave open a door to maneuver. Stylianides suggested that Papandreou could propose an executive legislative provision as part of the Constitutional amendment process that could protect the role of public universities but give a place for private universities to be recognized. Stylianides said if Papandreou will not table this kind of legislative solution then he will do so, however, he feels it will be more effective coming from Papandreou and wants to give him a chance to broker a solution. Stylianides dismissed our concerns over accreditation standards noting that this could be worked out if fundamental Constitutional reform could be achieved.

¶5. (SBU) As an alternative path, Minister Stylianides noted that the EU court might also force Greece to recognize EU degrees per the EU 2005/36 Directive and that it might be possible to include language that would include U.S. schools in subsequent recognition. He admitted, however, that it was unclear when or how that decision would be taken.

¶6. (SBU) As a more immediate, practical option, Stylianides suggested that U.S. schools might want to find a ?mother university? within the EU, particularly in Cyprus, with which to affiliate so the American schools could enjoy the benefits extended to EU institutions.

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¶7. (SBU) On a final note, Minister Stylianides reaffirmed his interest in sending a Greek delegation to the U.S. to meet with U.S. Department of Education counterparts, and representatives at the state and local levels, to learn more about the U.S. education system. He also wanted the delegation to explore the mechanism of charter schools to advance the teaching of Hellenic studies in the U.S. He said Ministry of Education Secretary General Ambassador Dimitris Platis would contact the U.S. Embassy soon to follow-up.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: There are two distinct tracks that may or may not move forward that will affect the viability of American educational institutions in Greece. The first is reform of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution. Minister Stylianides is right to seek allies to try to convince PASOK to support the amendment. In his departure call on opposition leader George Papandreou, former Ambassador Ries raised this issue. Ambassador Speckhard will also discuss in his first call on Mr. Papandreou. Given the political realities, however, it is unlikely that Papandreou will change his mind and Minister Stylianides recognizes this.

¶9. (SBU) The second track is Greece?s response to the EU 2005/36 Directive and the related EU court ruling. Our consistent message to the Greeks is that any legislation that is drafted to meet Greece?s obligations to the EU and the EU court should include, and not disadvantage, American institutions.

¶10. (SBU) Minister Stylianides is a pragmatist. He clearly believes education reform is needed but seems to think a Constitutional amendment is unlikely. He was also very vague about the timing and nature of Greece?s response to the EU 2005/36 Directive and the EU court ruling. His suggestion of alternatives for U.S. institutions to consider reflect his practical assessment of political realities and his interest in trying to find logical, last ditch remedies for American institutions to pursue if there is no Constitutional Amendment and if the GoG fails to implement legislation that includes American schools. In this dark scenario, these schools will have no choice but to affiliate with British or other EU universities. If forced to do so, we will likely see a gradual erosion of the ?American? educational model and style which

has characterized these institutions and their contribution to
Greece for over 100 years. End Comment.
SPECKHARD